

Spiritism in Papua New Guinea: The Challenges It Sets Before Western Christians

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Abstract: Christians acknowledge the realities of the spiritual world. However, spiritual activity among the people of Papua New Guinea, where animistic traditions and Christianity exist side by side, provide interesting challenges to Western Christian practices. This article leads one to think about Paul’s words in Ephesians 6—“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” How is our world influenced by spiritual ways, not only with our Western scientific understanding of how the world works?

While there are varying levels of spiritual awareness among Christians (especially when compared with those who claim no religion, those who claim agnosticism or those who are atheists), spiritual realities among the animistic peoples of the highlands of Papua New Guinea take things to a whole new level. This paper will describe some of these spiritual realities as experienced by the author from 1985 to 1998, during his time as an evangelistic missionary in Papua New Guinea. Some of the descriptions are of actual events witnessed by the author. Others are summaries of events that were related to the author by the individuals who experienced them.

The charismatic movement, that was a growing part of mainstream Christianity during the 1960s through the 1980s, provides a starting point. The controversial nature of this increase in “spiritual activity” was evident in many ways, one of which was a request by convention of The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod for a study by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) of this movement. The resulting document was published in 1977.¹ While it is not the purpose of this paper to analyze the theological issues related to the charismatic movement, the existence of the movement within Christendom is an entry point into increasing spiritual awareness. Even in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, where spiritual awareness was (and continues to be) significantly greater than in the “scientific” Western world of mainstream Christianity, the charismatic movement was very much a part of the Christian communities. Both Lutheran and Catholic missionaries sought ways to address the divisions that developed among the pro- and anti-charismatic groups in

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the church.

As an evangelistic missionary, I was called on several times to lead Bible studies in different locations of the Gutnius Lutheran Church in an effort to shed light on the issues at hand. One of the most common manifestations of the “spirit movement” was an activity called “bung prayer,” or group prayer. In areas where it was part of the local Christian “culture” there was often a time during the worship service when the leader provided an opportunity for all to speak their own prayers out loud. Some of the people prayed in the local language. Others spoke in ways that were unintelligible to those around them, which was seen as speaking in tongues as led by the Holy Spirit.

Often division arose among Christians, some arguing that if you didn’t participate in “bung prayer” you were not a real Christian, while others argued that “the missionaries didn’t teach us in this way and it wasn’t right.” The Bible studies most often focused on portions of Scripture that emphasize the unity of the Body of Christ, the possibility of specific spiritual gifts (including speaking in tongues) that were meant for the building up of the Body of Christ, not dividing it, and the importance of acknowledging that the presence or absence of a specific spiritual gift does not determine whether or not one is a Christian. Needless to say, these issues were not quickly resolved and likely still provide challenges among the Christians of Papua New Guinea. The example of “bung prayer” is only one of the issues connected to the spirit movement, but it is one that provides a bridge from our Western Christian way of thinking to that of the thinking process of the Christians of Papua New Guinea. What follows here takes us more deeply into a spiritual world that is significantly different from that of our Western worldview.

Dealing with spiritual activity was often very much a part of the thinking process of the Enga people, among whom we lived. Timothy Lutheran Seminary was located on an eight-acre parcel of land along the main road. People lived on small plots of land handed down in the tribal community. Kutasi was one of the local landowners whose ancestors had agreed to lease land to the seminary. He was a young man with a family. From time to time, he would work at the seminary—mowing the lawn, doing basic construction projects, and other things as needs arose. One day, he came to my door looking very sick. He said, “John, I’m sick. I need to go to the hospital.” He knew I had a vehicle and wouldn’t charge him if I took him. I didn’t really want to go, nor did I want him to die because I didn’t help. We got into the pickup and drove the half an hour to the hospital to which he wanted to go. I dropped him off at the hospital and returned home.

About a week later, Kutasi was again around the seminary community. He still wasn’t well but was somewhat functional. A few days later, he was on my doorstep, looking even worse than the first time. He wanted to return to the hospital, but I simply didn’t have time to take him. Instead I gave him the equivalent of five dollars to pay for a public motor vehicle so that he could go on his own.

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Two days later, word came that Kutasi had died at the hospital. Kutasi's tribe (close family) determined that a man named Raymond had "worked magic" that caused Kutasi's death. As an outsider, I was not privy to the decision-making process. What I did know was that Raymond was from a coastal area that was known for its use of magic, that is, using spiritual forces to affect the lives of people. He lived near Timothy Lutheran Seminary in a small village setting with some other non-Enga people, some of whom worked at a local community school and others (including Raymond) who worked for the Enga Provincial Government. He worked for the department of public works and was licensed to do blasting work in road construction. He, along with several others in his community, were members of the Betamanda Congregation that met every Sunday in the Timothy Lutheran Seminary chapel. Kutasi and his family also attended that service regularly.

As soon as Raymond was accused of using spiritual powers to cause Kutasi's death he was "gone" from the community. Had he not left, he would likely have been killed in retaliation. In the following days and weeks, negotiations went on between Kutasi's tribe and Raymond's community as to what the appropriate compensation was for Kutasi's death. Only when Raymond's community had paid the agreed upon number of pigs and amount of money in the local currency (Kina) was Raymond able to safely return to the community.

While I was not involved in any of the conversations associated with the situation, local pastors who were teachers at Timothy Seminary were involved. They were experienced in the application of Law and Gospel from the Lutheran Christian perspective and also fully aware of the cultural factors relating to spiritual understandings of the events. My Western worldview says: "How did they prove this? What evidence did they present?" At the same time, my mind goes to Paul's statement to the Ephesians:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Eph 6:10–12 ESV)

We find various ways to apply that statement to issues in our Western way of thinking, but it seems to connect rather directly to an understanding of the use of spiritual powers in the death of Kutasi.

Another example of attributing the actions of an individual to spiritual powers involved a woman, Andasowame, who helped my wife Jeanette with washing clothes and garden work when we lived at Yaramanda, the first Lutheran mission station in the Enga Province. Her son was attending high school and was accused of raping one of the high school girls. One day she arrived on our doorstep in tears. When Jeanette

finally got the complete story, the situation had taken a spiritual twist. The local leaders, including one of the old evangelists/pastors who had been trained by Rev. Otto Hinze, the first missionary, had come to Andasowame and explained that the reason her son was in trouble was her own fault. According to their understanding, she had not properly cared for her dying father-in-law and now the spirit of that dead man was repaying her by causing her son to engage in this inappropriate activity.

My initial response was: “How in the world could they even think of this?” However, as a new missionary, I was in no position to challenge them. The situation was in the hands of several local church leaders and they had to handle it in the way that fit with their culture and Christian theological understanding.

Unfortunately, we never did learn the outcome of the whole situation. Did she accept that it was her “fault?” What was the “proof” of this spiritual activity? However, we do know that this event did not destroy her Christian faith. Although Andasowame did not have the title “deaconess,” she was in actuality a deaconess. One evening, just as the sun had set and the evening rain had settled in, she came to our door with her kerosene lantern in hand to tell us about something that had happened that day. When we asked where she was going she replied, “To Bible study. One’s faith can’t be strong if one only worships one day a week.” With that, she set off in the dark, in the steadily falling rain, with her lantern to attend an evening Bible study. While she dealt with some spiritual realities that were quite strange from our perspective, her Christian faith shone through in ways that we could only hope many American Christians would emulate.

From time to time, former missionaries would return to Papua New Guinea to visit the areas in which they had worked and see some of the local people with whom they had worked. One such visitor, Pastor Gary Teske, had spent several years in a fairly remote location and was well-known for having been fluent in the Enga language.

One evening, before dinner, we were standing outside, talking with a pastor from another remote area, Pastor John Hulip, when Teske recalled an event in Hulip’s area. Pastors Marcus Felde and Teske were on a patrol into a rather remote area, and Hulip was with them. They came to one location and found the community in an unsettled state. After some inquiry, they learned that a local woman was dying. Being concerned for the woman’s welfare, they sought to have the woman brought to an open area for further evaluation and possible evacuation. The people were quite hesitant and resistant. After some time, and some rather persuasive arguments on the part of the missionaries, the people agreed and the woman was carried to a clearing. The missionaries examined her and found that she had a broken leg. Having access to a radio, they arranged for a helicopter to come in and evacuate the woman and her infant child for medical care.

After the evacuation, more discussion took place, and the missionaries learned the rest of the story. The woman had not had an accident. In fact, the local people suspected her of being a witch and were actually killing her when the missionaries arrived on the scene. Had they not arrived, the woman (and her son) would have died. Needless to say, the missionaries had various reactions, including relief at having saved the woman, but also concern as to whether or not they were in danger of some form of retribution for having interrupted the carrying out of a form of “justice” that had been decreed by the local community. Needless to say, the fact that Teske was standing there telling the story was proof that they had not suffered any negative consequences over the incident.

Having completed the story, Teske turned to Hulip and said, “Whatever happened to that woman?” Hulip replied, “She and her son returned to the area and she is still alive today.” He then turned to me saying, “Do you remember Nason? He is the little boy who was evacuated with her.”

Nason had been a student at Timothy Lutheran Seminary during my time there. He had graduated and gone out as a missionary to another remote people group. In a conversation with Nason, he described how he approached people with whom he was not familiar and who had no knowledge of the Gospel. He sought to get to know them, understand their issues and challenges in life, and slowly share how God had been at work in his life. I have no idea of whether or not he included this story about his mother, or if he even knew it. However, looking back at such events, one can’t but help standing in awe of the work of the Spirit of God in unusual ways. From the unknowing intervention of two missionaries that prevented the killing of a suspected witch came the proclamation of the Gospel to people who had never heard it before.

The words of St. Paul quoted above come to mind again. We don’t know the powers against which we labor. They are powers of which we can’t even conceive because of our Western worldview that downplays all things spiritual. Yet, the God whom we serve is there, in the midst of those spiritual powers, working all things for the good of those who are called according to His purpose.

Lest one say, “This was twenty-five years ago, things of this nature no longer happen today,” a couple of brief reports will bring things up to the present. In January, 2007, an article appeared on Yahoo News of Australia entitled “Four PNG women murdered for ‘sorcery.’” The first paragraph of the story read:

Four Papua New Guinean women, believed by fellow villagers to have used sorcery to cause a fatal road crash, were tortured with hot metal rods to confess, then murdered and buried standing up in a pit.

The third paragraph continued:

Black magic is widespread in the South Pacific nation where most of the 5.1 million population live subsistence lives. Women suspected of being witches are often hung or burnt to death.²

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Further, as this paper is being written, Anton Lutz, a missionary in Papua New Guinea, is actively engaged in dealing with situations in the Hewa area of Papua New Guinea related to women accused of being witches. Some of his work has been reported by MAF Papua New Guinea and ABC News out of Australia, as indicated on his Facebook page.³ Western Christianity, highly influenced by the materialistic worldview that tends to push spiritual things to the side, has not had to deal with true spiritual challenges in the same way as those societies that continue to see life as highly spiritual. It is a truism that one can only find that for which one is looking. This applies also to our lives as Christians. Often we choose to overlook things that don't fit into our worldview and focus on those things that are part of our understanding. That doesn't make those things any more real. However, it does make it important for us as Western Christians to realize that we don't fully understand all the ways in which God is at work in the world today and to be open to those ways, even if they are "out of the ordinary."

One final experience brings the reality of spiritual activity very close to home in my own life. It was not some "witchcraft" experience, but, upon reflection, a very real "God-at-work" event in my own life.

One December in the mid-1990s, I was invited to preach at the graduation ceremony at Senior Flierl Seminary (a school of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of PNG) in Lagoweng, on the coast of Papua New Guinea. We traveled to the coastal city of Lae by car, going on to Lagoweng by ship. Having completed the festivities, we returned to Lae with a student and his family from our local area. They had spent the school year at Senior Flierl Seminary.

It took a full day for us to travel by road from the city of Lae to our home in the Enga Province. As we embarked on the last leg of our journey, we began the climb out of the town of Mt. Hagen over the mountains that separated us from Enga Province. Slowly wending our way up the highlands highway, we were last in a string of vehicles. Loaded with five passengers and all the possessions of the family we were bringing back with us made it slow going.

As we rounded one of the hairpin curves, we saw a young man standing alongside of the road. When we passed him, he pounded a stone on the guardrail. It was strange, but not overly alarming. A couple of hundred feet farther up the road, two men stepped out on either side of the road with rifles pointed at us. Needless to say, I stopped. The passengers in the backseat were praying aloud. My mind racing, I decided that stopping was not really a good choice, and so I proceeded to go forward again. The men threw a rock at the windshield, indicating that they meant business. Knowing that it was not possible to outrun them up hill, I decided to back up. One side of the road was a drop-off of several hundred feet. I guess I hoped to back around the curve fast enough to get away from them. As I backed up, the pickup turned to the side of the road, backed between two trees within six inches on each side of the vehicle and into the yard of a small Catholic church. From there I was

able to drive out onto the road again and return to Mt. Hagen. The only damage was a broken windshield where the rock had hit it.

Needless to say, I was not driving the pickup. My hands were on the wheel, my feet were on the pedals, and my eyes were looking around. But, I didn't know it was possible to back through the ditch. I didn't know there were trees through which I had to back. I didn't know it was possible to back into the yard of that Catholic church. Very simply, God was at work, His angels guiding the movement of the pickup. Had I not been there, I would not know what to think of the experience. Even today it is hard to explain. It is an experience outside of our ordinary scientific Western worldview. Yet, I have no doubt that it happened.

As I talk with my World Religions classes about the animistic approach to life, I encourage them to think carefully about the spiritual world. From an animistic perspective, "Nothing in man's environment escapes the influence or manipulation of the spirit world. The world is more spiritual than it is physical, and it is spiritually upheld."⁴ That is not how we see things from our Western scientific/materialistic perspective, even as Christians. We acknowledge the truth of the Word of God, and yet we can have a difficult time truly understanding how Paul's words in Ephesians about spiritual powers really fit in our lives. The spiritual realities of peoples who have a spiritual instead of a scientific/materialistic worldview, give us greater insights into the biblical understanding of God's creation. We gain valuable insight from learning about their experiences, even if they challenge our own worldview and even our theological understandings.

Endnotes

¹ "The Lutheran Church and The Charismatic Movement: Guidelines for Congregations and Pastors," A Report of The Commission of Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Concordia Publishing House, April 1997.

² "Four PNG women murdered for 'sorcery,'" *The Sydney Morning Herald*, January 2007, accessed May 31, 2015. <http://www.smh.com.au/>.

³ Anton Lutz, "Stone Turners and Witch Killers," MAF Papua New Guinea, accessed January 24, 2015, <http://maf-papuaneuguinea.org/stone-turners-and-witch-killers/> and Liam Fox, "Women accused of witchcraft in PNG saved," *Australian Broadcast Corporation*, January 23, 2015, accessed January 24, 2015, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-01-23/women-accused-of-witchcraft-in-png-saved/6043968>.

⁴ Philip M. Steyne, *God's of Power: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Animists*, (Houston: Touch Publications, 1990), 37.